

HEGEL AND LACAN: SUBJECT, SUBSTANCE AND THEIR IMPOSSIBLE RELATION

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Summary: In this article, we are firstly going to reread Lacan's famous formula of the subject. This formula, "A signifier represents the subject for another signifier", remains in some respects opaque to say the least. Lacan, however, will not cease to repeat it throughout his teaching. Secondly, we will read a passage in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in which Hegel returns to the dialectic between subject and substance. In these readings, we will outline that defining the subject comes, for both authors, together with its difference from what the subject is seemingly opposed to: structure, substance, Other.

This difference is central and accentuates above all an impossible relation. Nonetheless, this impossible relation does not remain silent. Instead of being simply a relation between two terms - which would amount to their difference being only something theoretical (for thought) - it is rather that, in struggling with this impossible relation, both terms become actual (*wirklich*) in themselves. For Lacan, the relation between subject and Other fails, which makes it 'not to stop (not) being written'. For Hegel, the relation between subject and substance is contradictory, but this contradiction is understood as the subject itself, which is nothing but substance's own restlessness becoming 'in itself'.

In order to define the stakes properly, we will pass through Descartes and (Hegel's reading of) Spinoza, whose influence on Lacan and Hegel should not be underestimated. The first part of the article investigates how Lacan's structural formula is an attempt to write the Cartesian subject without rendering it into a thinking substance. Descartes does understand the subject as a thinking substance from the extended substance, or shortly, as thought separated from being (which has become famous as the Cartesian dualism). The second part treats how the problems with this dualism – and with Spinoza's monism which is to be the response to these – lead Hegel to write his own topology of the subject in relation to substance. The third part is an analysis of a joke during Stalinism which helps to illustrate the impossible relation between subject and Other (Lacan) or – which we read as overlapping – Hegel's dialectics between subject and substance.

Keywords: Lacan, Hegel, subject, Other, substance, difference, contradiction, non-relation, impossible relation.

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Introduction

Descartes' certainty of doubting

The notion of the subject has crossed the field of philosophy since Descartes. Moreover, Lacan refers to the Cartesian subject in order to localise the subject of psychoanalysis. In *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan specifies that, with this term of subject, he is “not designating the living substratum needed by this phenomenon of the subject, nor any sort of substance, nor any being possessing knowledge in his pathos, his suffering, whether primal or secondary, nor even some incarnated logos, but the Cartesian subject, who appears at the moment when doubt is recognized as certainty” (Lacan, 1998, p. 126). In the same phrase, Lacan confirms that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian subject and denies that the subject is “a thinking substance”. This could come as a surprise. It was Descartes himself who introduced the idea to think subject as a substance. How, then, should we conceive of the Cartesian subject without understanding it as a substance? Hegel will turn the formula of Descartes - to think subject as substance - around and invites us to think substance as subject. This might be of help - not only to grasp substance, but also to conceive of the subject as a failure of being substance, and therefore as a failure of substance to be itself. Let us first take up what Lacan finds in Descartes' procedure.

The discovery of the subject can be summed up by two moments which are characteristic of the Cartesian approach. Guided by methodical doubt - suspending everything that is not absolutely certain - Descartes first anticipates certainty¹. But soon he stumbles upon the fact that there is none, and that only that is certain. The desire for certainty stems from dissatisfaction, from doubt, from negativity². So,

1. “I will accomplish this by putting aside everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be completely false. I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.” (Descartes, 1998, p. 63)

2. “Is it not the very same “I” who now doubts almost everything, who nevertheless understands something, who affirms that this one thing is true, who denies other things, who desires to know more, who wishes not to be deceived, who imagines many things even against my will, who also notices many things which appear to come from the senses? What is there in all of this that is not every bit as true as the fact that I exist—even if I am always asleep or even if my creator makes every effort to mislead me?” (Descartes, 1998, p. 66)

it is only afterwards that Descartes' desire for certainty is transformed into the certainty of his desire. In the heart of this paradox - a negativity provokes the movement of thought - we find the notions of "subject" in Lacan and Hegel.

The Lacanian formula of the subject

For Lacan, "the subject is what is represented by a signifier for another signifier" (Lacan, 1998, p. 207). This "definition" of Lacan contains a kind of short circuit. Indeed, if one wonders what a subject is, Lacan replies that "the subject is what a signifier represents for another signifier"³ - and if one wonders, in order to clarify this formula, what Lacan means by signifier, we get that "a signifier represents a subject for another signifier"⁴.

How should we interpret this short circuit? We can at least be sure that the very form of the definition is sufficient to determine the terms it contains. We do not have to search for something other than the two elements "subject" and "signifier" to understand both. The elements might therefore be understood from how they relate within this definition. At first glance, this formula presents a sequence of two signifiers: "the signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier" - "traditionally" named S1 and S2 - and a third element - the subject represented therein. We can discern two differences within it. The first is the difference between S1 and S2. The second difference, which could be described as additional, arises from the fact that the subject is only "represented" by the signifier. In other words, the subject is not the signifier. Representation stems from the signifier *standing for* the subject. It is a presence, a materialization at the place of the subject (who is, moreover, absent), just as a representative of the people is not the people but acts in its place. This place exists only in relation to other signifiers. So, we have a difference between two signifiers and a difference between the subject and the signifier. In what follows, we will see that these two coincide.

3. "... une certaine définition, celle que je note du S barré [S/] c'est à savoir du sujet, du sujet pour autant qu'il n'est rien d'autre que l'effet de signifiant, autrement dit : 'ce que représente un signifiant pour un autre signifiant'" (Lacan, 1971-2, p. 124).

4. "Le signifiant, à l'envers du signe, n'est pas ce qui représente quelque chose pour quelqu'un, c'est ce qui représente précisément le sujet pour un autre signifiant" (Lacan, 1961-62, p. 60).

The differential nature of the signifier precedes the differentiated signifiers

The signifier is the material character of a word. To be an entity, a signifier must be identical to itself. Self-identity is a condition for a signifier. This self-identity of the signifier is defined by its difference from other signifiers and it is this “identity through difference” that is necessary for the existence of language. Language, then, consists of a set of differential entities. This difference is not only revealed at the level of sound, which would mean that the signifiers are inscribed in a general acoustic field and that within this field they differentiate themselves only quantitatively and not qualitatively and exclusively. Indeed, the difference between the signifiers is absolute. If this were not the case, the signifier would only differ in its acoustic aspect. The latter could neither explain the persistence of the unity of a signifier despite the great variety of possible pronunciations, nor the difference between homophonic signifiers (e.g., “prey” and “pray”, “bass” (sound) and “bass” (fish)). Moreover, when we speak, language breaks down into different fragments as a result of the distinction we make between the signifiers constituting a phrase. The field of sound does not always allow us to make this distinction (in speech, pauses between words are often rather vague). The signifier is distinguished by the (exclusive) place it occupies in relation to (all) other signifiers.

Due to the arrival of the second signifier, the first signifier - the “master signifier” - diverges from the second signifier (Lacan, 1969-70, p. 13). It is only to the extent that a first signifier is followed by a second signifier that the first acquires a place for the second signifier - S2 (also “Other” or “knowledge” for Lacan)⁵. The second signifier divides the first signifier in its positive presence - its acoustic trace, how it represents – and in its place (its difference) for others. By differing from others, the signifier comes to represent something for them. Because only this way does it begin to represent something that is not simply reducible to its acoustic character. Thus, it is the arrival of a second signifier that allows the first signifier to retroactively acquire not only

5. “S’il y a un savoir qui ne se sait pas, je l’ai déjà dit: il est à situer au niveau de S2, soit celui que j’appelle «l’autre signifiant». J’ai déjà assez insisté là-dessus l’année dernière: cet autre signifiant n’est pas seul, le ventre de l’Autre, du grand A, en est plein. Ce ventre est celui qui donne - tel un cheval de Troie monstrueux - l’assise de ce fantasme d’un «savoir-totalité». Il est bien clair pourtant que sa fonction implique que quelque chose y vienne frapper du dehors, sans ça jamais rien n’en sortira, et Troie ne sera jamais prise.” (Lacan, 1969-70, p. 13)

its status of first signifier, but more precisely, its very status of signifier as such. It is a genuine event, in fact, it is by pure contingency - the arrival of the second signifier - that the difference arises. Their difference thus precedes, as it were, the two signifiers that it constitutes (the first one by its dependence on a second one, the second one by its dependence on the fact there already is one, which it actually only constitutes by its arrival). It precedes them in the sense that the difference gives the signifier its specific character.

Hegel's differential nature of subject and predicate

In his Preface to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel speaks of the “need [among metaphysicians] to represent the Absolute [God, substance] as subject” (Hegel, 2018, p. 14). In their propositions: “God is eternal”, “God is the moral order of the world”, “God is love”, two parts can be distinguished: the grammatical subject and its predicate.

Hegel insists on the fact that in all these propositions, “God” - occupying the first place in the sentence - appears at first sight as “a meaningless sound, a mere name” (Hegel, 2018, p. 15). He emphasizes the impossibility for metaphysicians of simply affirming God in itself. It is necessary for them to add predicates to it. This leads to the term “God” being retroactively presented as an S1 in a proposition. Hegel underlines that it is only thanks to the predicate (S2) that “the empty beginning becomes real knowledge” (Hegel, 2018, p. 15). Once other signifiers are added to the first one, the game is on, the S1 represents something (what God “really” is, beyond his simple name) for S2 that the latter tries to signify. On the one hand, we witness the birth of a metonymic movement at the level of S2 that consists of a constant addition of signifiers that anticipate the complete meaning of what the word “God” represents. On the other hand, we are witnessing the need for these predicates (S2) to refer to a grammatical subject (S1), to “something else” that they are trying to signify. According to Hegel: “one cannot simply ignore the reason why one cannot speak only of the eternal, of the moral order of the world, etc., or, as the ancients did, of pure concepts, of being, of one, etc.” (Hegel, 2018, p. 15). S2 alone does not suffice. Therefore, we will say, with Lacan, that an S2 needs an anchor, an S1, something still insufficiently signified that the other signifiers aim to signify. Without this “meaningless sound” (S1), the developing meaning (S2) would itself be meaningless. It is therefore the difference between S1 and S2 which provokes the actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), the movement of the signifying chain.

Failure and movement, difference and repetition

The metonymic movement - the addition of different signifiers (S2, S3, S4..., movement reduced to S2) - inexorably misses its purpose. In running after the gap, the ever-increasing multiplicity of other signifiers confirms the gap they were meant to fill. The subject, then, is this failure produced by the activity of signification. This endless movement could be described as tragic. All efforts to bridge the gap between what S1 represents and S2's attempt to seize it are in vain, just as Tristan cannot bridge his distance with Isolde. What Isolde represents will remain forever lost to Tristan - they remain irretrievably separated by structural destiny.

Nevertheless, to take the gap as a mark of destiny (a distance outside the two parts it distinguishes) is not the path that Hegel and Lacan will follow. This incessant attempt of S2 marks the presence, the actuality of the difference between S1 and S2. This actuality of the difference *is* the subject.⁶ In the same vein, Descartes recognizes in the actuality of his thought/doubt himself as subject. The subject is therefore the difference between S1 and S2, which we find not only in S1 (the distinction between its presence and what it represents) but also in S2, as the impossible at work in its repetition. Taking this difference as something external to the parts it differentiates, as tragedy does - is therefore a disavowal. For when one takes this difference away, one loses the constitutive core of both parts and of the subject.

6. "Is there not, reproduced here, the element of alienation that I designated for you in the foundation of the subject as such? If it is merely at the level of the desire of the Other that man can recognize his desire, as desire of the Other, is there not something here that must appear to him to be an obstacle to his fading, which is a point at which his desire can never be recognized? This obstacle is never lifted, nor ever to be lifted, for analytic experience shows us that it is in seeing a whole chain come into play at the level of the desire of the Other that the subject's desire is constituted. In the relation of desire to desire, something of alienation is preserved, not with the same elements — not with the S1 and S2 of the first dyad of signifiers, from which I deduced the formula of the alienation of the subject in my last but one lecture — but with, on the one hand, what has been constituted on the basis of primal repression, of the fall, of the *Unterdrückung*, of the binary signifier, and, on the other hand, what appears first as lack in what is signified by the dyad of signifiers, in the interval that links them, namely, the desire of the Other." (Lacan, 1998, p. 235-236)

The difference between I and substance, between thought and being

We find the same movement in the articulation between I and substance in Hegel. In what follows, we are interested in a precise passage from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel develops his topology in an extremely reduced and precise manner. Since the Hegelian and Lacanian terms are not the same, we will concentrate especially on the analogy of the differences between the terms, in order to be able to compare the Hegelian topology with the Lacanian one.

“The inequality that takes place in consciousness between the I and the substance which is its object, is their difference, the negative itself. It can be regarded as the lack [Mangel] of the two, but it is their very soul, that is, it is what moves them [das Bewegende derselben]. This is why some ancients understood the void as what makes things move [das Bewegende], in conceiving what makes things move as the negative. But they did not yet grasp this negative as the self [das Selbst].

However much this negative [between I and substance] now initially appears as the inequality between the I and the object, still it is *just as much the inequality of the substance with itself*. What seems to take place *outside* of the substance, to be an *activity directed against it*, is its own doing, and substance shows that it is essentially subject.” (Hegel, 2018, p. 23)

In the first part of this passage, we encounter two opposing terms: “I” and “substance”. The difference between them is typical in representational philosophies according to which “I” and “substance”, “what I think” and “what is”, subject and Other are found in two ‘parallel worlds’ without interaction. Hegel here attempts to overcome this distinction, not by bridging the gap between the terms, but by considering the distinction itself (inequality, difference) as a positive feature, as “what makes things move” or the “self”. The passage might be best understood as an answer to Descartes and Spinoza. Indeed, after his discovery of the subject, Descartes baptises the subject into a “thinking substance” (*res cogitans*, I) - a self-subsistent thing excluded from the “extended substance” (*res extensa*, outer world): “For [even] when I think that a stone is a substance, or at least a thing capable of existing of itself, and that I am a substance also, although I conceive that I am a thing that thinks and not one that is extended, and that the stone on the other hand is an extended thing which does not think, and

that thus there is a notable difference between the two conceptions — they seem, nevertheless, to agree in this, that both represent substances.”

Descartes' dualism, the subject in quarantine

Descartes differentiates between two substances: thought and being. Following Descartes, these two entities do not need anything else but themselves to subsist. The problem underlying this type of distinction is that here Descartes does not take into account the fact that it is thought itself that makes the very division between the terms (this is why Hegel writes that “the inequality *takes place in consciousness*”). Thought happens to be both one of the two terms and the agent that takes into account their difference. In fact, as soon as one differentiates between “thought” and “being”, one realizes that this very distinction goes beyond the distinguished parts. It is through this excess of division that Descartes first discovers the subject. To consider the two substances as separate from each other cancels his own discovery. Let us return, in detail, to the manner in which he discovers the subject in order to underline how the act of division marks the very presence of the subject.

As we have seen, systematic doubt leads Descartes to distinguish his thoughts between two distinct categories: the category of doubt and that of certainty. Descartes bets on the existence of a certainty that would be beyond all doubt.⁷ He quickly realizes that doubt and certainty do not simply make “two” (like the two he assumes when he considers thought substance and extended substance as two entities). The more Descartes tries to assign certain thoughts to the categories of doubt or certainty, the emptier the category of certainty turns out to be. When Descartes is confronted with this gap, only one certainty remains, that of the division proper to the action of his thought.⁸ He discovers the fact that his own doubt comes from the lack of certainty to begin with. Descartes therefore recognises in the emptiness of his result the excessive activity of his own thought. I, who think, must therefore exist. The subject cannot but exist, in fact, it is by stumbling against the constant absence

7. “I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable” (Descartes, 2012, p. 71).

8. “Am I not that being who now doubts nearly everything, who nevertheless understands certain things, who affirms that one only is true, who denies all the others, who desires to know more, is averse from being deceived, who imagines many things, sometimes indeed despite his will, and who perceives many likewise, as by the intervention of the bodily organs?” (Descartes, 2012, p. 14)

of certainty that the certainty of the frustration of the one who tries to get rid of it appears to him.

For the first time in the history of philosophy, and this is Descartes' step, certainty has nothing to do with a certainty that would be found in an object external to thought. In fact, Descartes argues that it does not matter whether he actually sees an object or whether he simply thinks he sees it.⁹ It does not matter whether he is doing the right thing or not, or whether he knows what he is doing. What matters is that the thinking, the doubt, the separation and the division "really" happen. So it is not a matter of certainty as to content. On the contrary, the content remains uncertain. This does not prevent the form of uncertainty to exist, and it is this form that will enable him to catch a glimpse of the existence of the thinker.

It is in the same vein that the form of thought separates itself from the content, *res cogitans* from *res extensa*, the subject from the outer world. But this dualism again creates a problem for thought. Is the subject condemned to remain in a formal quarantine, separated from the outside world? How can a thinker get out of this subjective or formal cage? Is the other inevitably cut off from me?

Spinoza's monist substance-God: difference identified

Post-Cartesian philosophies are confronted with this problem. If the subject is certain of herself, how can she consider what remains outside of it? According to Hegel, Spinoza is the one who best articulates a (beginning of) solution to this problem:

"The simple thought of Spinoza's idealism is this: The true is simply and solely the one substance, whose attributes are thought and extension or nature: and only this absolute unity is reality, it alone is God. It is, as with Descartes, the unity of thought and Being, or that which contains the Notion of its existence in itself. [...] With Descartes corporeality and the thinking 'I' are altogether independent Beings; this independence of the two extremes is done away with in Spinozism by their becoming moments of the one absolute Being." (Hegel, 1892-6)

If Descartes is sure - because he doubts - of the production of his thought, he finds a way to attribute being - or at least existence - to the process of his thought. He can thus conclude: "*I think therefore I am*"

9. "it follows much more evidently that I myself exist. For it could happen that what I see is not truly wax. It could happen that I have no eyes with which to see anything. But it is utterly impossible that, while I see or think I see (I do not now distinguish these two), I who think am not something." (Descartes, 1998, p. 69)

Therefore, even if Descartes radically distinguishes being from thinking, Spinoza points out that, on the contrary, the peculiarity of Descartes' knot resides in the fact that thinking and being intersect. For Descartes, the thought of the one who thinks about "being" is not itself the being he thinks about. Nevertheless, the thinker can grasp that his thinking itself implies being, actuality, the reason he can say "I think therefore I am" in the first place. Being is therefore no longer on the Other Side, it coincides with the activity of thought itself.

In this way, Spinoza "overcomes" the Cartesian distinction by affirming the absolute identity of thought and being, what he calls substance (or God). Instead of a dualism, we thus obtain a monism, which is based on identity, on the overlapping of thought and being. When *that* I think is equivalent to *what* I think, in other words, when idea and matter, form and content coincide, we are in the reign of Spinozist truth. For him, mere understanding - who understands its thinking as separated from being - is therefore not yet the realm of truth.

Hegel's trouble in Spinoza's paradise: the subject's distance to substance is also substance's distance with itself

This is precisely where Hegel sees the problem with Spinoza's theory. "How does it come that besides the Deity there now appears understanding which applies to absolute substance the two forms of thought and extension? and whence come these two forms themselves?" (Hegel, 1892-6) If we start from one substance where thought and being are identical, how then to account for understanding,¹⁰ or for the fact that their difference is formerly been made? Difference, following Hegel, is a prerequisite for the identification of a thing. The principle of identity (A is A) requires two A's in order to be able to identify them. Split is therefore internal to identity.¹¹ Spinoza considers this preceding difference as an epiphenomenon, an error, an "inferior stage" hierarchised under the superior stage of identity. For Hegel, on the contrary, this type of reasoning is itself the error:

"... However much this negative [between I and substance] now initially appears as the inequality between the I and the object, still it is *just as much the inequality of the substance with itself*. What seems to

10. "Understanding" has to be understood as the mode of thinking that only separates and analyzes, but does not take the identity of what it separates into account, which "reason" does.

11. Note how this is similar to Lacan's idea of the unity of a split: "You will grant me that the one that is introduced by the experience of the unconscious is the one of the split, of the stroke, of rupture." (Lacan, 1998, p. 26)

take place *outside* of the substance, to be an *activity directed against it, is its own doing*, and substance shows that it is essentially subject.” (Hegel, 2018, p. 23)

The law of identity or non-contradiction within Aristotelian logic asserts that “something cannot be at the same time A and non-A”. Hegel’s thesis, on the contrary, is that contradiction is what makes something actual (*wirklich*). “All things are in themselves contradictory” (Hegel, 2010, p. 381). The contradiction - something being A and non-A at the same time, being itself and its negation - provokes a thing’s internal state of restlessness¹². If Hegel asserts “the inequality of the substance with itself”, or substance being substance and non-substance, this should be read as substance’s proper contradiction, that which makes substance move. Instead of Spinoza’s substance as absolute Identity (A is A), Hegel’s substance presents itself therefore as an actual contradiction. Substance is at once itself - identity - and its opposite moment - subject.

Hegel therefore does not consider “understanding” - the experience of the subject separated from being, as we have seen - to be external to the absolute identity of substance. On the contrary, if the subject fails to understand the substance, he already understands the secret of the substance itself.

Descartes can affirm that he exists as a subject, but he fails to grasp what that subject is that exists. He comes up against an impasse: that of not being able to think the subject as substance. For Hegel, this very conception prevents us from thinking the essence of substance. On the contrary, he asserts that “substance [...] is essentially subject” (Hegel, 2018, p. 23). Instead of asking what substance would be outside of the limits of the subject and of our understanding, Hegel thus inverts the question: What is substance if the subject emerges from his inability to grasp it, from his inability to become one with it? For Hegel, this impossibility is in itself the clue to substance. We find this point in the Hegelian adage that Žižek likes to quote: “The secrets of the Egyptians are also secrets to the Egyptians.”¹³ Instead of preventing access to the

12. “Internal self-movement, self-movement proper, drive in general (the appetite or *nisus* of the monad, the *entelechy* of the absolutely simple essence) is likewise nothing else than that something is, in itself, itself and the lack of itself (the negative), in one and the same respect. Abstract self-identity is not yet vitality; but the positive, since implicitly it is negativity, goes out of itself and sets its alteration in motion. Something is alive, therefore, only to the extent that it contains contradiction within itself: indeed, force is this, to hold and endure contradiction within.” (Hegel, 2010, p. 382)

13. “In the same way in which we try to explain this meaning to ourselves, it might have been clear and intelligible as a meaning to the insight of the Egyptians themselves. But the Egyptian

substance, the subject is the preferred means of contact with it. This way, Hegel asserts that the absolute identity proper to substance is only possible when one counts one's own experience of being excluded from substance, as the essence of substance itself.

If the task of philosophy is to bridge the distance to its object, then one could consider substance as the mother of all philosophical concepts, since it promises the identity between thinking and being. If substance is the identity between thinking and being, then thinking substance is the same as being substance. To think substance correctly is to "experience" it, that is, to grasp the point where substance no longer presents itself only for us, but also in itself.

So it is more than an analogy to consider substance as Lacan's Other. If desire of the subject is the desire of and for the Other, the lack of the Other provokes the metonymic movement of the subject's speech while the subject's activity only repeats the lack in the Other. (Lacan, 1998, p. 235-236) Subject is the effect of the Other's lack. In Hegelese: the inequality between subject and substance is the inequality of substance with itself.

Concluding illustrations: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce

Marx wrote that "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (Marx, 1963, p. 15).

Although we have previously stressed the tragic structural destiny that separates Tristan and Isolde, we cannot ignore Marx's reading of Hegel. So let us ask ourselves: how can Tristan's tragedy be repeated as a farce? If Isolde embodies for Tristan the point to be reached by crossing the distance between them, one can raise Isolde to the rank of "substance" (or Lacan's "Woman") for Tristan. If he manages to bridge the distance that separates him from Isolde, would he not lose his very love? What if the object of Tristan's love was not the person of Isolde, but the distance itself? One could perfectly imagine a comic scene in which Tristan randomly bumps into Isolde and tells her about his great

symbols, as we saw at the very beginning, contain implicitly much, explicitly nothing. There are works undertaken with the attempt to make them clear to themselves, yet they do not get beyond the struggle after what is absolutely evident. In this sense we regard the Egyptian works of art as containing riddles, the right solution of which is in part unattained not only by us, but generally by those who posed these riddles to themselves." (Hegel, 1998, p. 360)

love to kill time without recognizing her, until the moment Isolde says to him “but Tristan, I am Isolde?”. Wouldn't Isolde fade away completely, divided between the woman Tristan tells about and the one Tristan speaks to?

A Soviet joke about Karl Radek - a historical figure of Bolshevism who never stopped to criticize the Stalinist regime from within the Communist Party - is a perfect illustration of this point.¹⁴ In the eyes of the people, the figure of Karl Radek was ambiguous. They could not decide whether he was a traitor or a true Communist. The joke goes as follows.

In Gulag, two prisoners meet. One asks the other why he was arrested... The prisoner answers, “I said Karl Radek is a revolutionary.” He returns the question to the other, who answers, “I said Karl Radek is counter-revolutionary.” Confused, they realize there's a third person to whom they ask the same question: “And you, what are you here for?” To which he replies, “I am Karl Radek.”

Now let us read it again with the definition of the subject (Lacan) and the question of substance (Hegel) in mind. Karl Radek is the name, the S1 representing the subject. The first two answers (S2) anticipate the meaning of what S1, Karl Radek, represents. The first two types of answers (S2) are contradictory, but this does not ruin the promise of a coherent meaning of what S1 represents. The secret of Karl Radek remains stuck on the Other Side. When Karl Radek announces “I am Karl Radek”, his bodily presence does not seem to be a solution to the contradiction between the first two answers, on the contrary, it adds nothing, it only affirms this contradiction as such. The very contradiction seems to be the subject represented by the name “Karl Radek”.

What now of the substance - the Other - in this joke? Far from merely underlining the way in which the subject erupts, this joke points to the system shared by the different protagonists. Karl Radek cannot be correctly categorized as either a “traitor” or a “communist”. This distinction is crucial in the Stalinist era: the betrayal of communism must be carefully separated from communism itself in order to create a “truly existing socialism”. The very act of distinguishing between communism and anti-communism exceeds the two resulting parts. This is the very substance of Stalinism. The system “works”, moves and determines itself by excluding what does not belong to it.

14. For the joke and its historical context, see (Lewis, 2009, p. 58-62).

Karl Radek extends the field of distinction proper to Stalinism by including the reference point from which this differentiation is made (Stalin). He obstructs the smooth functioning of the system by the system's own means ("what seems to take place outside of the substance, to be an activity directed against it, is its own doing" (Hegel, 2018, p. 23)). Stalinist communism thus seems to be embodied in the ambiguous figure of Karl Radek. Karl Radek is - by its impossible categorization - the name of this very categorization. He thus embodies not only the subject but also the constitutive gap in the Other, the contradiction within the substance that makes substance both possible and impossible. The joke thus reveals not only the aphanisis of the master signifier (Karl Radek), which turns out to be internal to S2's failed attempt to signify S1, but also marks the productive contradiction inherent in substance itself ("the inequality of substance with itself").

Thus, the relation between subject and substance (and the relation of substance with itself) is not a relation of identity (as Spinoza supposes), of indifference (like Descartes' thinking substance and extended substance), of proximity, of opposition, of proportion or of mere difference. The problem then is how to theorize a relationship that cannot be positively described? Lacan sought different ways of expressing this throughout his teaching: the difference between S1 and S2, the moebius band where the two faces turn out to be one, the sexual non-relation, the Klein bottle, etc. For Hegel, the agitation at work in each of his concepts amounts to absolute negativity. Its presence can be discerned in notions such as "the coincidence of opposites", "contradiction", "the negation of negation", the formal distortion within the content. After having affirmed the aforementioned inequality of substance with itself, Hegel affirms that "with this, the Phenomenology of the Spirit comes to its conclusion." (Hegel, 2018, p. 23) The Phenomenology of the Spirit concludes with the famous "absolute knowing". This prompts us to read absolute knowledge as the moment when one understands one's own lack as the lack at the heart of substance itself. One may therefore wonder why Lacan categorically rejects the Hegelian notion of "absolute knowing"¹⁵. Hegel's "absolute knowing" could be much closer to what Lacan calls the inexistence of

15. For instance: "Mettrons-nous cet être en balance avec celui que Hegel comme sujet a forgé, d'être le sujet qui tient sur l'histoire le discours du savoir absolu? On se souvient qu'il nous témoigne en avoir éprouvé la tentation de la folie. Et notre voie n'est-elle pas celle qui la surmonte, d'aller jusqu'à la vérité de la vanité de ce discours. N'avançons pas ici notre doctrine de la folie. Car cette excursion eschatologique n'est là que pour désigner de quelle béance se séparent, la freudienne de l'hégélienne, ces deux relations du sujet au savoir." (Lacan, 1966, p. 802)

the Other, than he could admit. Nevertheless, and this could be the conclusion, from there a fruitful reading of Hegel with Lacan can be made.

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